

# The Search for the Original 1774 Easter Island Manuscript of Johann Reinhold Forster

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Recently I visited Berlin to have a look at new developments there. Newspaper reports since the fall of the infamous wall and the re-establishment of Berlin as the capital of united Germany indicated that extraordinary developments are taking place. I can confirm that this is no exaggeration although there is still a very marked difference between the well developed and lively West Berlin and the drab and rundown East Berlin, where the plaster on many houses still shows the impact of bullets. However, the building activity now going on around the Potsdamer Platz is simply terrific. During the construction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York I regularly passed that building site and I can assure American readers that, although the skyscrapers under construction around the Potsdamer Platz are not a quarter of the height of WTC, the building site is at least fifty times as large. It is indeed incredible: underground railways, sewers, roads, fly-overs and buildings are all constructed over a surface of hundreds of hectares. There are no road signs yet and the new buildings have no numbers. I have not felt so lost since visiting Japan.

One of the reasons for going to Berlin was that I hoped to be able to get a look at the original manuscript of the journal of Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798), dating from his visit to Easter Island in March 1774. Forster was the German botanist on Captain Cook's second exploration trip on the *Resolution*.

First the story about this manuscript must be told. After the successful first trip around the world by Captain James Cook (1768-1771), a second trip was being prepared in 1772. The naturalist on the first trip, Joseph Banks, was also to join the second expedition. But he had made excessive constructions for his 'laboratory' on the deck of the *Resolution* and these would have seriously hampered the handling of the sails at sea. Captain Cook was highly irritated when he saw this during an inspection of his ship and had them removed. Insulted, Banks withdrew two weeks before the intended departure. So at the very last moment a new botanist had to be sought.

Johann Forster was offered the position and he accepted immediately--provided that his son Georg, then only 18, would be allowed to accompany and help him. This was acceptable, so they both took part in Cook's second trip.

Johann Forster was a difficult character, as is often the case with men of more or less universal genius. He certainly made himself the most hated man on board by insisting that all sailors eat a daily dose of sauerkraut. But as a result of this not one sailor died from the dreaded scurvy during their long three-year stay at sea. Upon their return, Johann Forster got into difficulties with the Admiralty when he presented his report. No formal arrangements had been made about this before the ship's departure, and so Johann Forster had written separate reports on plant and animal life and on ethnology and languages, and he presented them as separate documents. The Admiralty wanted a combined report, together with the nautical report of Cook, and so they started re-editing Forster's part. This was unacceptable

and Forster got into an argument with Lord Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty. This was done in such a tactless way that finally Lord Sandwich forbade its publication completely, and the journal disappeared from sight. It was the son Georg, who was not affected by the Admiralty's prohibition, who published his book *Entdeckungsreise nach Tahiti und in die Südsee, 1772-1775* and got much credit for it. (I quoted extensively from this book in *RNJ* Volume 6 (1 and 2), 1992). No one knows exactly how much the father acted as a ghost-writer for his son. But Georg had always gone ashore during the trip, sometimes without his father who suffered from bad attacks of rheumatism. So Georg could just as well have written it himself.

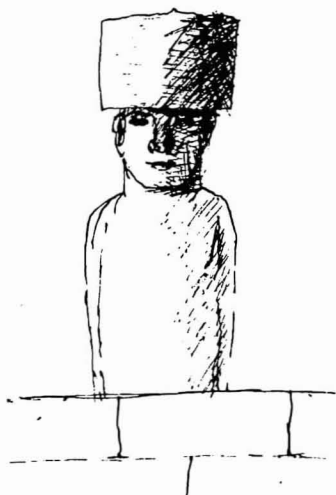
When Johann Forster died in 1798, his widow sold his extensive library of over 7,000 volumes. It was acquired by the Staatsbibliothek der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. But the journal of the *Resolution* was not included in the catalogue of the museum. It had disappeared.

This remained unchanged for nearly two centuries. It was recognized that Johann Forster's work on the *Resolution* had been of the greatest scientific importance, therefore many researchers deplored the loss of his journal. At last Michael E. Hoare decided to make an enquiry. In the 1970s he went to (then East)Berlin, where the Staatsbibliothek der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz was still in existence. He studied the catalogue of the Johann Forster library in detail and found that apart from books with titles, there was also mentioned a bookcase with "...one drawer of unbound books." He asked to see it and there appeared the manuscript of Johann Forster's *Resolution* journal. Since 1799 no one had bothered to ask for this unspecified material. Hats off for Michael Hoare! Now the study of this manuscript could begin. In 1982 the Hakluyt Society in London published the full text of *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Forster, 1772-1775*, edited by Michael Hoare.

It was the original of this manuscript that I hoped to see during my stay in Berlin. Over the last ten years the mention of Lenin and Stalin, etc. in the names of many buildings and streets has changed, but the Staatsbibliothek der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz has retained its horribly Prussian name. However, it has moved to a new site on the edge of this tremendous building pit that I describe above. In a new modern building of great size, hundreds of students sit silently in the reading room assiduously studying the screens on their computers. At the end of this reading hall there is the room of old manuscripts. After just a few formalities I was able to lay my hands on all the original manuscripts of Johann Reinhold Forster: four leather bound volumes of the journal, meticulously written in beautiful English, and four more leather bound volumes in Latin with detailed descriptions of all the animals and plants that they had discovered. This was really a great sensation for me. One must realize that after the Joseph Banks' laboratory cabin on the *Resolution* was torn down, Johann Forster was allotted a cabin of very small size and when the waves were high, seawater seeped into it and it became

extremely damp. That explains his attacks of rheumatism. Gradually this cabin filled up with stuffed animals that the Forsters collected and later even with living animals when goats and sheep were taken on board as a supply of fresh meat. Forster complained about this situation but of course nothing could be done about it. Under these circumstances the journal was written. One cannot help being seized with admiration. The hundreds of pages are written in a sure hand, with amazingly few deletions; the writing is quite small with no margins on any side, surely in order to use all the available paper to the absolute maximum.

A second sensation was that the journal contains a few illustrations made by the author. Apart from a sketchy map of the island there are three from Rapa Nui: one is a drawing of a *hare paenga* that merits no special comment. The two others are reproduced here: one is of a *moai* with a face that looks more like that of a Scottish sailor (Reinhold was of Scottish descent) than of the tight-lipped, angry-looking original.



The third drawing, that of a Rapa Nui canoe, is outstanding. Forster writes in his journal for March 14<sup>th</sup> 1774, even before they had landed and while they were still looking for a safe anchoring place, that a canoe approached them. He then



wrote: "The boat which came off seemed to be a very wretched thing, patched together of several pieces, the head & stern high & the middle low; THERE WAS AN OUTRIGGER FIXED TO IT (my capitals), & each of the Men had a paddle made of more than one piece, which sufficiently proves the want of wood on this Isle..." So even before landing Forster already arrived at the right conclusion about the scarcity of wood on

Rapa Nui. The important thing is the mention of the outrigger, visible in the sketch. The outrigger is an invention of Austronesian speaking peoples, who spread from South East Asia to Madagascar in the West and Easter Island at the Eastern corner of the Polynesian Triangle. Everywhere they left the outrigger canoe; it can be regarded as a form of their calling card. A.C. Haddon and James Hornell mention in their standard work *Canoes of Oceania* (Bishop Museum Press, Honolulu, 1936/1938) that Gonzáles, La Pérouse and Choris also mentioned the outrigger on Rapa Nui canoes during their visits to the island in 1770, 1786 and 1816 respectively. The existence of outrigger canoes on Rapa Nui before the first contact with Europeans gives a very strong indication of where the islanders came from. And this has been noted with pleasure by your roving correspondent.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Johann Reinhold Forster, who had studied theology and classical languages at the University of Halle made a study of German colonization on the banks of the River Wolga at the request of the Russian Czarina Catherine II. She was concerned because settlers had gone there at her request and there were reports that they were badly treated in Russia. On his Wolga trip Forster was accompanied by his son Georg who was then 11 years old. Forster presented his highly critical report with the result that the Czarina never paid him for his efforts. Father and son Forster also used their stay along the Wolga to collect and identify plants and minerals. They moved to England where Johann got a post as lecturer at Warrington College in languages (apart from German he mastered English, French, Latin, Greek, Russian and Koptic) and biology. He wrote articles for scientific periodicals and was nominated 'inspector' of the Museum of the Royal Society (which was later to become the British Museum). English friends suggested Forster as naturalist/botanist to Captain Cook.

<sup>2</sup>There exists a remarkable parallel here with the journal of Jacob Roggeveen, the discoverer of Easter Island in 1722. It also disappeared for two centuries, as I noted in my article in *RNJ* 7 (4) 1993.

<sup>3</sup>Forster was disgusted that he only found 20 species of plants on Rapa Nui.

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